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ABSTRACT

One of the central developmental tasks of adolescence is the change of the parent-adolescent relationship, which includes the gradual gain of autonomy from parents while at the same time maintaining emotional connectedness to them. Conflicts often arise in this process. This study used a sample of 202 adolescents from 14 to 19 years of age to investigate the reported intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers. Results showed that, on average, the adolescents reported more intense conflict with mothers than fathers. In analyzing predictors of conflict intensity with mothers and fathers separately, a higher reported intensity with fathers was associated with their better knowledge about adolescents' attitudes and behaviors and with more time spent together. On the other hand, joint time, parental knowledge, and strict disciplining did not predict conflict intensity with mothers. Adolescents who reported above-average differences between conflict intensity with mothers and fathers reported larger differences between time spent with mothers and fathers, between maternal and paternal knowledge of adolescent's behavior and attitudes, and between maternal and paternal strict disciplining. (Contains 27 references.) (Author/EV)

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Influences on conflict intensity between adolescents and their mothers and fathers

Poster presented at the XV Biennial ISSBD Meeting, Berne, July 1-4, 1998.

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Abstract

Differences in the reported intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers are investigated using a sample of 202 adolescents (15-19 years old). On average, the adolescents reported more intense conflict with mothers compared to fathers. In analyzing predictors of conflict intensity with mothers and fathers separately, a higher reported intensity with fathers was associated with their better knowledge about adolescents attitudes and behaviors and with more time spent together. On the other hand, these variables did not predict conflict intensity with mothers. A larger difference in conflict intensity with mothers than fathers was associated with a larger difference in knowledge of adolescents behavior between mothers and fathers, a higher difference in joint time with mothers than fathers, and with stricter disciplining in mothers compared to fathers.

Introduction

Adolescence is known as a time of biological, psychological, and social change. One of the central developmental tasks is the change of the parent-adolescent relationship, which includes the gradual gain of autonomy from parents while, at the same time, the maintenance of emotional connectedness to their parents. The individuation process includes the development of a self-concept as independent from the relationship to parents (White, Speisman and Costos, 1983) and an increasing autonomy in thinking and behavior (e.g., making their own decisions, questioning their parents opinions, spending more time outside the family, Cooper, Grotevant and Condon, 1983; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Conflicts arise from diverging expectations and opinions of social partners. Social conflicts are defined as a dyadic, interpersonal, behavioral event involving opposition (Shantz, 1987). Conflicts vary in topic, frequency, intensity, and in the way of conflict solution. Many parent-adolescent conflicts arise from contradictions between adolescents' wish for more autonomy and parents' wish to control the behavior of their offspring (Collins, 1990; Smetana, 1991), e.g., in the case of leisure time use, or choosing friends.

Previous research has shown a higher frequency and intensity of conflicts of adolescents with mothers compared to fathers. For example, Laursen (1993, 1995) or Yau and Smetana (1996) reported up to three times more mother-adolescent conflicts (e.g., Laursen, 1993, 1995; Yau & Smetana, 1996). In addition, some

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differences in conflicts with mothers and fathers seem to vary according to the topic of discussion (Besevegis & Giannitsas, 1996).

In the following paper we will address influences on the intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers. First, we will try to replicate the higher conflict intensity with mothers than fathers that was reported in previous studies. Second, we will focus on such aspects of interaction with mothers and fathers that may influence the intensity of conflicts. We will investigate if aspects that may promote conflict intensity (the amount of joint time, parental monitoring, strict disciplining) are more pronounced in mothers than fathers. Third, before we analyze influences on the *difference* between conflict intensity with mothers and fathers, we will check separately for mothers and fathers if the amount of joint time, parental monitoring, strict disciplining are associated with the intensity of social conflicts with both parents. Fourth, we will predict differences in conflict intensity with mothers and fathers from differences in the amount of joint time, parental monitoring, and strict parenting.

Hypotheses

Our first hypothesis is focused on differences in the intensity of reported conflicts with mothers and fathers.

(1) Adolescents report a higher intensity of conflict with mothers than fathers.
In Hypothesis 1 we want to replicate previous research findings (e.g.,Laursen, 1993, 1995). Possible causes for the assumed difference in conflict intensity will been discussed below.

In the next step we will investigate differences between mothers and fathers in parental behaviors that may be related to conflict intensity.

(2a) Adolescents report more joint time with mothers than fathers.
In many families the role of fathers is still associated with employment and earning money, while mothers are the primary child-carer (Russell, 1983). Mothers will, therefore, have more contact with their offspring compared to fathers (Miller & Lane, 1991; Montemayor & Brownlee, 1987). In addition, the cases of parental separation and divorce reduce the frequency of father-child interactions.

(2b) Adolescents perceive higher maternal than paternal knowledge about their attitudes and behaviors.
Because of mothers role as primary agent of parenting, mothers monitor their offspring more than fathers. For example, Hagan et al. (1992) and Youniss and Ketterlinus (1987) found higher maternal than paternal monitoring. In addition, higher emotional closeness to mothers than fathers (Noller &Callan, 1990) may promote adolescents' self-disclosure to mothers.

(2c) Adolescents report a stricter disciplining of fathers than mothers.

Several studies report less readiness to compromise in fathers than mothers (Honess et al., 1997; Noller & Callan, 1990). Fathers' disciplining should, therefore, be perceived as more strict.

The next hypothesis is focused on predictors of conflict intensity.

(3) **A higher reported intensity of conflicts with both mothers and fathers is associated with a higher amount of joint time, more parental knowledge about adolescents' attitudes and behaviors, and higher intensity of strict disciplining.**

More time spent together gives more opportunities for (intense) conflicts and less chance to avoid conflictual discussions. Because arguing about adolescents' attitudes and behavior presupposes parental knowledge, parents with better knowledge should be involved in more intense conflicts with their offspring. While high permissiveness of parents should reduce conflict intensity (because parents tolerate behavior and attitudes that differ from their own so that adolescents do not need intense conflicts to gain autonomy), strict disciplining should restrict adolescents striving for autonomy and, therefore, provoke intense conflicts.

Our last hypothesis is focused on the family unit. We will investigate variables that should enlarge the difference between intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers.

(4) **A larger difference in the intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers is associated with a larger difference in time spent with the respective parent, with a larger differences in parental knowledge of mothers and fathers, and with a higher difference in the intensity of strict disciplining in mothers and fathers.**

Because joint time gives more opportunities for (intense) arguing there should be larger differences in conflict intensity with mothers than fathers in those families where mothers spent clearly more time with their offspring, compared to fathers. In Hypothesis 2b we assumed that a higher amount of parental knowledge about adolescents' behavior and attitudes is associated with more intense conflicts. In those families where mothers show a very high level of monitoring compared to fathers (or where, conversely, fathers show much less interest in their adolescents' behaviors and attitudes, compared to mothers) we should find, therefore, very high differences in conflict intensity in favor of conflicts with mothers. Because parental control is seen as a crucial variable of parent-adolescent conflict (e.g., Montemayor & Hanson, 1986), we expect that disproportional strict disciplining in mothers compared to fathers should increase the difference between conflict intensity with mothers than fathers.

Participants

Data from 202 adolescents (14-19 years) were analyzed. They took part in a longitudinal study on influences of the German unification on development in late

childhood and adolescence, partially supported by the German Research Council (grant Si 29/14-1,5; Principal Investigator, R.K. Silbereisen). Parent-adolescent conflicts were investigated at the second time of measurement. All participants were interviewed at home. For the present paper we selected those adolescents who gave information on conflicts with both mothers and fathers.

Methods

1. Parent-adolescent conflict: The participants were asked about the intensity of four conflict topics with mothers and fathers:

- the use of leisure time
- school performance and professional choice
- the use of adolescents' money, and
- which kind of friends they have.

The questions were answered on a five-point scale (0 = no discussion, 1 = calm discussion, 2 = relatively calm discussion, 3 = relatively intense discussion, and 4 = intense discussion). The four item scale has an internal reliability (Cronbachs' Alpha) of .68 (mothers) and .72 (fathers).

2. Time spent together: The five item scale asked for the frequency of joint meals, conversations, and several leisure activities with fathers and mothers. The scale has an internal reliability of .68 for time spent with mothers and .77 for time spent with fathers.
3. Parental knowledge (adolescents' self-disclosure to parents): The participants were asked about the frequency of telling their mothers and fathers about their use of leisure time and about things they are occupied with. The three-item scale has an internal reliability of $\alpha = .54$ (mothers) and $\alpha = .65$ (fathers).
4. Strict disciplining: Three items asked if parents strictly forbid behaviors, use punishments for forbidden behavior without exceptions, and demand behavior, irrespective of the adolescents' wishes. The scale has a reliability of .53 (mothers) and .57 (fathers).

Results

In the first step of analysis, we pairwise compared the intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers. Differences were tested with the non-parametric Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test for related samples. As shown in Figure 1, adolescents reported, on average, higher conflict intensity with mothers than fathers. The differences are highly significant in conflicts about the use of leisure time, the use of money, and friends ($p < .001$); and in conflicts about school and occupational choice at the 5% significance level. Our data, therefore, support Hypothesis 1.

We again computed Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests to compare the amount in joint time, monitoring, and strict parenting of mothers and fathers. In correspondence to Hypothesis 2a and 2b, adolescents reported spending more time with mothers than fathers ($p<.0001$), and telling their mothers more about their attitudes

and behaviors (p<.0001). On the other hand, there were no differences in the reported strict disciplining of mothers and fathers. Our data, therefore, did not support Hypothesis 2c on differences in parenting style. Figure 2 showes the intensity of the three variables under investigation. Because the variables differed in scaling, in Figure 2 we used z-standardized measures.

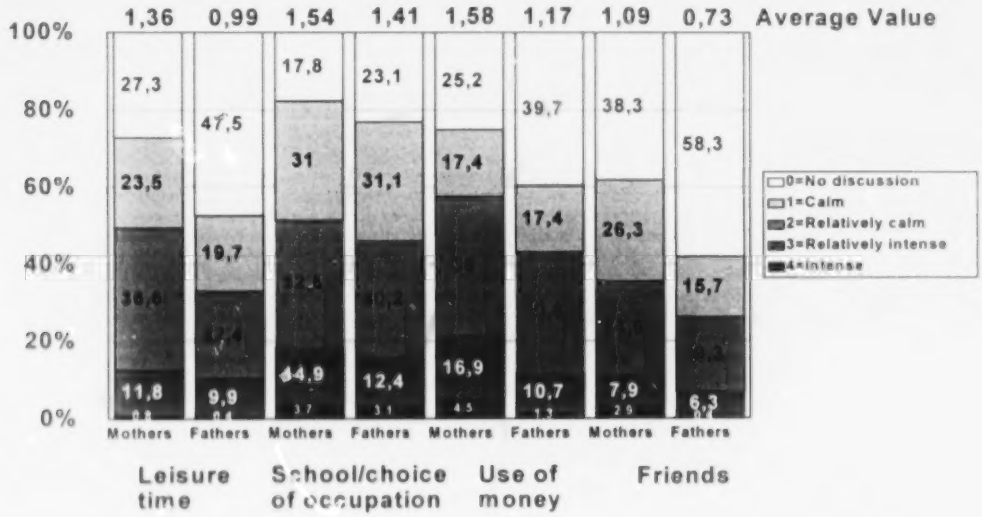

Figure 1: Intensity of Reported Conflicts with Mothers and Fathers

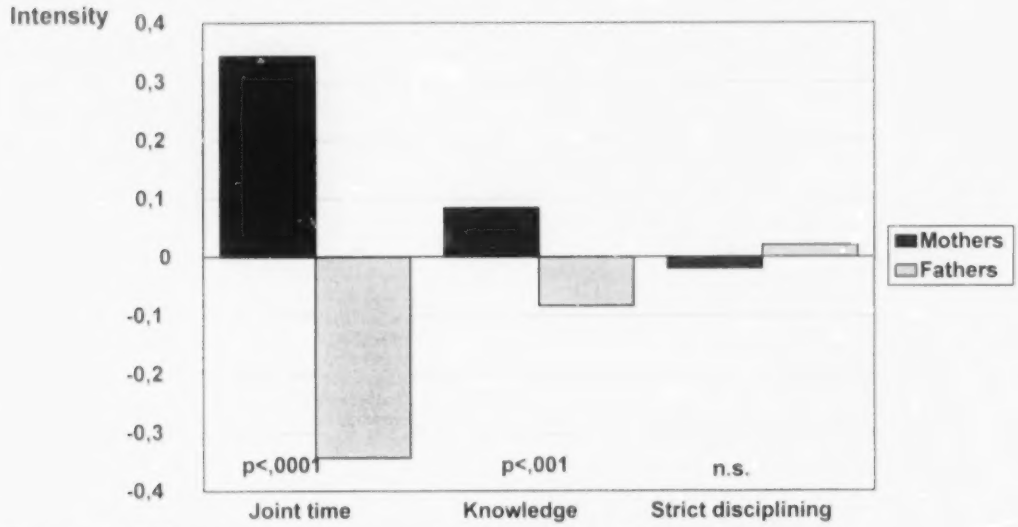

***Figure 2:* Differences in parental behavior (Standardized measures)**

Are the variables investigated above associated with the conflict intensity with mothers and fathers? In testing Hypothesis 3, separate multiple regressions were run to predict the intensity of conflicts with mothers and fathers. As independent variables we used the amount of joint time, parental knowledge, and strict

disciplining. In addition, we controlled for adolescents' age and gender. As shown in Table 1, more intense conflicts with fathers were associated with better knowledge of adolescents behavior and attitudes and with more time spent together. In the regression model there was no significant relationship between strict parenting and conflict intensity with fathers. However, we found a correlation in the expected direction at the 7% significance level (r = .13). In addition, older adolescents reported less intense conflicts with both mothers and fathers. On the other hand, the reported intensity of conflicts with mothers was not related to joint time, parental knowledge, and strict disciplining. Hypothesis 3, which assumed an influence of parental behavior on the intensity of conflicts with adolescents, was, in part, supported for conflicts with fathers but not with mothers.

Table 1: Predictors of reported conflict intensity of adolescents with mothers and fathers (Multiple linear regressions)

	Mothers (R^2=.04)		*Fathers (R^2=.17)*	
	B	ß	B	ß
Adolescents' Age	-.27	-.14 *	-.36	-.18 **
Adolescents' Gender (1=Male, 2=Female)	.58	.09	.48	.08
Joint Time	-.07	-.09	.12	.21 **
Parental knowledge	.11	.06	.30	.19 *
Strict disciplining	.08	.04	-.03	-.01
Constant	9.29		5.41	

* p<.05 ** p<.02

In our last hypothesis we change the focus from dyadic relations of adolescents with mothers and fathers, respectively, to the family system. We were interested in variables that enlarge or reduce the reported difference in conflict intensity of adolescents with mothers and fathers. We, therefore, computed the difference in the reported conflict intensity with mothers and fathers. Higher values of the computed variable show a higher reported intensity of conflicts with mothers than fathers. Because we assumed that differences in conflict intensity with mothers and fathers would be associated with a larger expression of parenting variables in mothers than fathers, we, again, computed differences between mothers and fathers in the three predictor variables. In a multiple linear regression, the difference in conflict intensity was predicted by differences in joint time, parental knowledge, and strict disciplining. We, again, controlled for adolescents' age and gender. As shown in Table 2, bigger differences in conflict intensity with mothers than fathers are predicted by larger differences in parental knowledge of adolescents attitudes, in joint time, and in strict disciplining. Our data, therefore, support Hypothesis 4.

Table 2: Predictors of differences in reported conflict intensity with mothers and fathers

	B	*ß*
Adolescents' age	-.04	-.03
Adolescents' gender	.52	.09
Difference in time spent together	.13	.18 *
Difference in parental knowledge	.42	.25 **
Difference in strict disciplining	.36	.17 *
Constant	.36	

(Larger numbers of the dependent variable indicate higher differences in conflict intensity with mothers and fathers) R^2=.20 * p < .05 ** p < .01

Discussion

In correspondence with previous literature, adolescents reported, on average, higher conflict intensity with mothers than fathers (Laursen, 1993, 1995), more joint time with mothers than fathers (Miller & Lane, 1991) and higher knowledge about adolescents' behavior in mothers compared to fathers (Hagan et al., 1992). Spending more time with and higher self-disclosure to mothers reflects the mothers' role as the primary agent of parenting in families. The lack of differences in reported strict disciplining of mothers and fathers may, first, result from the use of a relatively global measure. Second, differences in strict parenting between mothers and fathers may be smaller than expected. For example in contradiction to the hypothesis of stricter disciplining and less egalitarian behavior of fathers than mothers, Youniss and Smollar (1985) reported more egalitarian behavior of fathers compared to mothers.

Consistent with our assumption, a higher intensity of reported father-adolescent conflicts was associated with a higher amount of joint time and higher knowledge of adolescents behavior and attitudes. Spending more time together gives more occasions for conflict discussions; knowing more about the adolescent gives, in addition, more topics for discussions. On the other hand, we were not able to find an association between joint time, parental knowledge and the intensity of conflicts with mothers. The lack of association with joint time is supported by a study of Laursen (1995), however, only on the frequency and not intensity of parent-adolescent conflicts: A positive correlation between the frequencies of father-adolescent interaction and frequency of conflicts was shown, while there was no association between the frequency of mother-adolescent interaction and conflict frequency.

The lack of association between maternal monitoring and the amount of time spent with mothers, and conflict intensity, first, may result from mothers' role as

primary agent of parenting: Less time spent together and less maternal monitoring may leave sufficient space for intense conflicts, especially in the case of repeated conflicts on one and the same topic. In fathers, on the other hand, less joint time with adolescents and less monitoring may reflect a distant father-role which, again, inhibits conflicts. Second, the amount of time spent with mothers and maternal monitoring may be more important for other conflict topics, not investigated in this study. For example, in a sample of 10-13 years olds we found a positive association between maternal monitoring and the intensity of conflicts regarding, for example, being orderly, and going to bed (Pinquart & Srugies, in prep.). Third, we found some evidence that monitoring and time spent with adolescents is more strongly related to relational quality with mothers than with fathers. We calculated correlations between the amount of joint time and parental knowledge with items measuring adolescents' perceived importance of mothers and fathers. In fact, there were significant correlations of the subjective importance of mothers with joint time ($r=.16$, $p<.02$) and parental knowledge ($r=.14$, $p<.04$), but no significant correlations to subjective importance of fathers. Much joint time with mothers and high self-disclosure of adolescents to mothers may, therefore, reflect high relational quality which, again, may inhibit conflict intensity.

The lack of association between strict disciplining and conflict intensity in mothers and fathers may reflect two contradictory effects of strict disciplining: On the one hand, it may promote parent-adolescent conflicts, because strict parenting hinders increase of autonomy in adolescents. On the other hand, in the case of strict disciplining, adolescents may see little chance of success in conflicts with their parents which, again, may encourage adolescents to retreat from conflict situations before they become intense (Pikowsky & Hofer, 1992).

Older adolescents reported less conflicts with both parents. This confirms previous results on a decrease in conflict intensity in late adolescence (e.g., Furman & Buhrmester, Collins & Repinski, 1991). Parents increasingly their older offspring to make their own decisions.

In Hypothesis 4 we were interested in variables that increase or reduce the difference between conflict intensity with mothers and fathers. Those adolescents who reported above-average differences between conflict intensity with mothers and fathers reported larger differences between time spent with mothers than fathers, between maternal and paternal knowledge of adolescents' behavior and attitudes, and between maternal and paternal strict disciplining. Our data show that fewer opportunities to argue with fathers than mothers, and less maternal than paternal control (monitoring, and, in part, strict disciplining), are associated with reduced differences in conflict rates with mothers and fathers. Because fathers monitor the behavior of their offspring less than mothers (Hagan, Hollier, O'Conner & Eisenberg, 1992; Youniss & Ketterlinus, 1987) they have less knowledge about adolescents' attitudes and behaviors that differ from their own beliefs. Therefore, fathers seemed to be involved in less intense parent-adolescent conflicts than mothers. As, in most families, mothers are the primary agent of parenting, mothers often make demands that go against the desires of their children. On the other hand,

fathers often avoid conflicts (Jackson, Cicognani & Charmen, 1996), or leave critical decisions to their adolescent children (Smetana, 1988). We should mention again that the amount of joint time with and monitoring of mothers did not predict the intensity of conflicts with mothers. It was, instead, the balance between mothers' and fathers' joint time, monitoring, and strict disciplining that predicted differences in conflict intensity. This reflects the interdependence of mothers' and fathers' behavior in the family system. The family is seen as a social system (e.g., Minuchin, 1985), thus, the relations between adolescent and one parent are influenced by the relations to other family members. Also, because the adolescent learns whether conflicts with mothers or fathers have a higher probability of success or should be avoided, differences in parenting behavior will, therefore, influence the extend to which adolescents' conflict intensity to mothers and fathers differ.

In our study we investigated three influences on the balance of conflict perceived intensity with mothers and fathers. Other variables may also contribute to differences in conflict intensity (Collins & Russell, 1991;Laursen & Collins, 1994). For example, Steinberg & Hill (1978) assumed that fathers may be seen as too powerful, so that adolescents try to seek greater influence by challenging their mother (Steinberg & Hill, 1978). In addition, adolescents may have a stronger need to individuate from mothers than fathers because the mother-child relationship is closer than the father-child relationship (Noller &Callan, 1990). Unfortunately, we had no data to test these hypotheses.

We are aware of the fact that we only had adolescents' self reports to analyze, which may be subject to various distortions, such as subjectivity in judgements and evaluational standards. This criticism is, however, weakened by the correspondence of our data to another study predicting parent-rated conflict intensity from adolescents' reports about the parent-adolescent relationship (Pinquart & Srugies, in prep.). Here again, higher conflict intensity with mothers than fathers is predicted by higher maternal compared to paternal monitoring, and by differences in parenting styles. This supports the assumption of the validity of our data. In addition, we are aware that there may not only be influences of parental behavior on conflict intensity but, that conflicts may also change the parent-adolescent relationship. Therefore, longitudinal studies are needed to analyze causal relationships between parental behavior and conflicts between parents and their offspring.

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